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Testimony in Support of House Bill Number 5135 Higher Education and Employment Committee March 8, 2022

Senator Slap, Representative Elliott, Senator Witkos, Representative Haines and distinguished members of the Higher Education and Employment Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of **House Bill 5135: AN ACT EXPANDING THE ROBERTA B. WILLIS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM TO STUDENTS OF PRIVATE OCCUPATIONAL SCHOOLS.**

The House Republican Caucus believes strongly that a post-secondary vocational education offers an additional opportunity for students in our state to pursue careers that do not require a college degree. Reserving a portion of these scholarship funds for these students would not only make this opportunity more affordable but would also address a shortage of qualified tradespersons our state is currently experiencing.

The pathway from a secondary education to the workforce does not end when we obtain our high school diplomas. We continue learning new skills and trades throughout the duration of our lives. Sometimes these skills are learned in a traditional setting, other times we learn them on our own. Vocational postsecondary schools have an important place on the pathway to a career of many of our most valuable professionals. They are places that turn students of all ages, from all backgrounds, into working tradespersons while our current economic environment is one that is suffering from a major shortage of professionals in the construction and manufacturing industries.

As regulators, it is our duty to ensure that the pathway to the workforce, for students of any age, is one that is smooth, clearly defined, and efficient. Financial aid has become a necessary part of this pathway. Currently a Connecticut resident is eligible for the Roberta B Willis Scholarship Program Merit Scholarship Program if they have a class rank of 20% or better and an SAT score of at least 1200. A Connecticut resident is eligible for the Roberta B Willis Need-Based Grant Program if they have an expected family contribution of less than \$12,390 on a FAFSA filing. For the merit based grant program, grants are awarded up to \$5,250 for full-time attendance in a 4-year program of student, \$4,650 a year for full-time attendance in a 2 year program of study. For the need based grant program, grants are awarded up to \$4,500 for full-time study in a 2 or 4 year program.

While these grant amounts are wonderful, one 2020 study found that Connecticut, on average, has the eighth highest cost of tuition when compared to the other 49 states. Consider this alongside the fact that the average student borrows over \$30,000 to pursue a bachelor's degree, and many graduates of traditional four-year programs feel they must obtain an additional graduate degree before they are ready to enter the workforce.

This is not the case with our technical colleges and universities. Graduates of these schools are ready to enter the workforce immediately and with less student loan debt they start their pathway to economic independence immediately. We should not be promoting a bachelor's degree pathway over the pathway to trade licensure. Treating these programs with equal regard sends a clear message to prospective students that which ever path is chosen, Connecticut stands ready to support the futures of prospective students, whether they have earned a merit based scholarship or they are suffering a financial hardship. We ask that the committee join us in supporting and advancing House Bill 5135.